

Hoppers. by Genevie

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Summary:

Nobody realises that Hopper had traded Eleven's safety for Will's, so everybody agrees that he should be the one who looks after her now that she's back and whole and safe again, an indelible part of their messed-up circle. He thinks that Eleven deserves better, so much better than a washed-up police chief who's already done wrong by her and who can barely keep himself together without building a latticework of masks around himself, but she doesn't have better.

She has him, and so it goes that he has her, too.

Hoppers.

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The Wheelers will not take her because Karen is afraid, rightfully, for her family. Not because of Eleven herself, but because of the trouble lurking ever-present in her shadow. Joyce cannot take her because she is already strained so tight that she has no give left, even if she does have more heart for the task than anyone else. Terry Ives doesn't have it in her to accept that her daughter is twelve years old now, not when she has long craved her baby Jane, newborn and helpless and small enough to sleep in the crook of her arm.

Hopper has time, though, and money, and nothing else to protect besides a sleepy little town where the only bad things that happen gravitate towards him, anyway. It's a natural fit, they say. It will be good for them both. He thinks that Eleven deserves better, so much better than a washed-up police chief who's already done wrong by her and who can barely keep himself together without building a latticework of masks around himself, but she doesn't have better.

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Almost everything about the double-wide is different now; new furniture, new paint, new carpets, new appliances, a new bedroom newly pink. He would have torn up the floors, too, if he'd had the time but even that wouldn't have felt like enough. It's the trailer itself that's the problem. It's Hawkins. It's the feeling of being trapped, and it's the same overwhelming discomfort of existing in his own skin that had driven him away from Indianapolis four years earlier.

On the night before Eleven arrives, he doesn't sleep. He doesn't even stay at home. He just drives until the morning sun is bright and the clock is no longer counting down the hours before it's time to get Eleven, having wound down into minutes. Then he turns his car

around towards the Byers house and he thinks, “This is it. Don’t fuck this up.”

♦ ♦ ♦

Eleven notices the drawing first, with its three little stick figures and its one-windowed, one-doored house standing next to a tree. She presses her finger right beside the smallest figure, careful not to smudge anything, and she says, knowingly, “Sarah.”

He can’t remember the last time he heard his daughter’s name spoken without grief or pity; without the sound of it catching in someone’s throat like it’s too thick of a word to speak. “Yeah, kid,” he says, putting his hands on her shoulders, aiming her towards the bedrooms. “Let’s show you where you’ll be staying.”

This is not what Eleven wants to do, though. She removes his hands from her shoulders. Her fingers play across the blue hair tie around his wrist and she repeats herself, “Sarah.”

He wishes he know who had told her about his daughter so he could give them a piece of his mind. Sarah is his to share. Not anybody else’s.

♦ ♦ ♦

Later, when he asks the others about how Eleven knew, they all look as confused as he does. She should not know. And yet, she does.

♦ ♦ ♦

The scream is piercing, guttural. Hopper’s only heard a sound like it once before, on a night-darkened and blood-stained street in Indianapolis where he had walked into the moments after a murder to see a seventy-year-old woman kneeling beside her husband’s body, yelling skywards.

Nobody had told him about Eleven’s nightmares because nobody knows that she has them. Her mind was chaotic even before the upside-down but that was a chaos she knew, a chaos she could control. And afterwards, curled up in the Byers’ home, she would press her fists against her mouth and bury her face in her pillows

because Will was always in pain, too, and it was her fault. She opened the gate; she released the demogorgon. What right did she have to Jonathan playing music for her, or to Joyce stroking her temples and telling her that everything would be all right, or to Will bringing her a glass of warm milk to help her fall back to sleep?

None, she thought, so she remained a brave little girl, just like Joyce said she was.

When Hopper opens the door to her bedroom, she leaps off the bed and throws herself at him like a bird smashing against a window. He wants to take her by the shoulders, give her a shake, ask her what's she doing, can't she tell that he's built from glass? But instead he wraps his arms around her carefully, as if her wings are broken. As if there's a starburst crack forming at the centre of his chest.

"Is this bad?" she asks. "Joyce said..."

"No, you're good, kid."

It surprises him how tight her hold is, and he wonders if it's all her strength or if there's a telekinetic element to it—if maybe she is manipulating the air around them to make herself feel even more present, more safe, more contained. She's crying but she doesn't make a sound, and he wonders about that, too, though he doesn't let that thought linger. Abused children have their own language, quiet and internal. They'll translate it to real sounds only when they're ready.

"Did you have a bad dream?" he asks, not expecting an answer. Not getting one, either. He leaves it there, knowing how terrible it can feel to be pushed into talking and how nice it is to find comfort in the simplicity of silent togetherness.

♦ ♦ ♦

She wants to see pictures of Sarah. She wants to be read to from the same books. "Tell me," she says, sometimes, and Hopper knows without asking that she would like to hear another story about her.

He obliges her every time.

"How old?" Eleven asks one day, and Hopper tells her that Sarah was

five when she passed, that she would be ten now, almost eleven. “Little sister,” she says, running her finger along the edge of a photograph of Sarah dressed as a galaxy princess for Halloween, smiling. “Pretty.”

♦ ♦ ♦

Hopper doesn't always sleep through the night, himself. It used to be that he could slip out back and enjoy a cigarette, watching the wind ripple across the lake, imagining all of his concerns sinking to the bottom of the water and slipping beneath the silt, out of reach. But now, Eleven joins him.

Sometimes she'll stand beside him, placing her hand next to his on the railing, watching the water with a confused look on her face, trying to understand what he's doing but not wanting to ask. Other times, she brings him something from the kitchen—a mug of poorly-made coffee, a frozen waffle, the leftovers that they'd both left out on the table—then goes back to bed. Mostly, though, she comes outside wrapped in a blanket and she leans against the back of his legs until he's ready to go inside again.

He often thinks about apologising to her. Equally often, he questions what that would accomplish besides placing an ineffective salve on his guilt. Though he doesn't feel that he deserves Eleven's trust, he knows that she deserves to feel secure. The drive to keep her safe is instinct to him now; he will fight to the death for her. He will place her above all else. Why give her any reason to think otherwise?

♦ ♦ ♦

Once, she asks him if she's supposed to call him dad.

“You don't have to do that,” he says, not wanting to tell her yes even though he's already started to slip into calling her *my kid* instead of his usual *the kid*. Not wanting to tell her no, either.

“I like Hop,” she says, taking a small leap forwards, smiling when she lands. “Like a bunny.”

“What, like Peter Cottontail?”

“No. Bigwig.”

“Okay, Fiver, I can get behind that.”

“Fiver?”

“No good?”

“Good.” Her smile is even brighter now. She takes another leap.
“Fiver is a hopper, too.”

♦ ♦ ♦

Blood begins to appear in odd places. Wiped on sleeves, dripped onto shoes and slippers and socks, soaked into tissues that are shoved into empty beer cans or buried at the bottom of the trash. Specks of it dot the bathroom sink on occasion, and he's noticed more than a few smears of it, poorly-cleaned, on the floors and on the walls.

When he asks her about it, she grows stiff and quiet, emotionally catatonic. “Promise me you aren't in any trouble,” he says, and she says, “Promise.” It's hard for him to accept that promise so simply, but he figures that if he has the nerve to want her to trust him after what he's done, then at the very least he can also agree to trust her.

♦ ♦ ♦

Though she still doesn't speak very often, when she does she starts using full sentences.

“On Friday, we're going to watch all the Star Wars movies. Mike says its a marathon. They want to do it on that day because of a line in the movie. May the force be with you. And it's May the fourth.”

“I think I'd like to try to make my own waffles. Mrs Wheeler said that she'd teach me but I want to learn from you. It's okay if you don't know how. We can find out together.”

“I'm looking forward to summer. Lucas says we can swim in the lake. He says it's better than swimming in a pool because its bigger and it doesn't smell like chlorine. And Will says that if we get bored of swimming, we can catch frogs.”

Most importantly, she asks him one day, “Is it okay to keep a really big secret from someone if you want to surprise them with it later?” and when he tells her that yes, it’s fine, as long as keeping the secret won’t hurt them, she gives him a smile and squeezes his wrist, right over Sarah’s hair tie, before running off to be with her friends.

♦ ♦ ♦

Joyce calls him at work.

“I just swung by to see how she’s doing,” she says, “And there’s blood,” she says, “I can’t get her to wake up,” she says.

And the earth stops spinning on its axis, and the ground beneath Hopper’s feet lurches like an earthquake, and time shifts into a lower gear; slow, hard to get moving. He feels like he’s just been plunged miles deep into the cold heart of the ocean and the pressure or the water is crushing his chest. All he can hear is the roar of his blood pulsing in his ears. He barely remembers leaving the station, or getting in his car, or driving home. There is simply no room in his mind for anything besides fear.

When he arrives, Eleven is seated on the couch, conscious, holding her own weight, and Hopper tries to ignore how much blood has soaked into her dress and how many bloodied napkins are strewn across his coffee table. Joyce is still in the process of removing the last traces of red caked onto Eleven’s neck, but she looks up when she sees Hopper and gives him a nervous smile.

“Jesus,” he says, still standing by the door. “It looks like a crime scene in here.”

Eleven can’t meet his eyes. “I’m sorry,” she says, her voice soft, scared.

“Okay,” he says. “Okay.” Even though it’s not okay; even though anger is rising through him like smoke, thick and acrid. He’ll choke if he keeps it down, so he stops trying. “What the hell were you thinking?”

“I don’t...”

“Look at you. What if Joyce hadn’t come by? What if something had happened to you? You’re not a goddamned experiment anymore.”

“Hopper! She’s already—“

“Joyce, stay out of this.” He looks back to Eleven, who is still looking away from him. In this moment, there’s so much more distance between them than the few metres that separates them, and he hates it, so he closes as much of that distance as he can, taking a seat on the coffee table, right in front of her, placing his hands over hers and looking her in the eye, staying silent until she looks up, too. “Nothing is more important than your health. Nothing. Do you understand?”

“Yes. But...”

“But what?”

“I found her.”

♦ ♦ ♦

There was a time when the word experimental meant something positive to Hopper. Its contrast to terminal—such a cold and barren word, as harsh and as colourless as an Arctic winter—was beautiful, warm as the summer sun, as hopeful as the first days of spring. He and Diane had together agreed to every injection, every surgery, every crackpot theory the doctors presented to them, heedless of warnings. What did the dangers matter when doing nothing meant resigning themselves to Sarah’s death?

They had no idea what they were setting her up for. Not a single damned idea.

♦ ♦ ♦

He sits and he thinks, “I do not deserve this.”

He sits and he thinks, “I haven’t done enough for the kid.”

He sits and he thinks, “I handed her over to Brenner and she does this?”

He sits and he thinks, once again, “I don't deserve this.”

Joyce stays with him even after they put Eleven to bed. “You taught her something special, Hop,” she says, breaking a silence that has stretched on for far too long. “You taught her about family.”

♦ ♦ ♦

Just outside of Hopper's old house in Indianapolis is a playground, and just inside of that playground he sits with Eleven on a bench beneath a tree. Each holds the other's hand. He isn't sure if he's shaking, or if Eleven's shaking, or if maybe they both are.

From what he has managed to piece together, he figures that Sarah was injected with something that put her into a temporary state of lifeless stasis, then abducted from the morgue and replaced with a cotton-stuffed dummy. Eleven can't tell him what happened to her after that—where she was, who she was with, how she was doing—only that she knew she was still alive when she reached out to touch Sarah's drawing and felt it touch her back.

When they see the girl appear, dirty and thin and marred by the upside-down but running towards them with the strength of good health, Eleven tries to pull her hand away from Hopper's as if she's just lost the right to it, but Hopper takes it back, squeezing it even tighter. “Little sister,” he says, parroting her own words from months earlier, and they meet Sarah together.